

Thanks to John Billings' memoir of his life as a Union soldier, *Hardtack and Coffee* (1887), we have a very accurate description of what Civil War hardtack rations were like:

What was hardtack? It was a plain flour-and-water biscuit. Two which I have in my possession as mementos measure three and one-eighth by two and seven-eighths inches, and are nearly half an inch thick. Although these biscuits were furnished to organizations by weight, they were dealt out to the men by number, nine constituting a ration in some regiments, and ten in others; but there were usually enough for those who wanted more, as some men would not draw them. While hardtack was nutritious, yet a hungry man could eat his ten in a short time and still be hungry. When they were poor and fit objects for the soldiers' wrath, it was due to one of three conditions: first, they may have been so hard that they could not be bitten; it then required a very strong blow of the fist to break them; the second condition was when they were moldy or wet, as sometimes happened, and should not have been given to the soldiers: the third condition was when from storage they had become infested with maggots.

When the bread was moldy or moist, it was thrown away and made good at the next drawing, so that the men were not the losers; but in the case of its being infested with the weevils, they had to stand it as a rule ; but hardtack was not so bad an article of food, even when traversed by insects, as may be supposed. Eaten in the dark, no one could tell the difference between it and hardtack that was untenanted. It was no uncommon occurrence for a man to find the surface of his pot of coffee swimming with weevils, after breaking up hardtack in it, which had come out of the fragments only to drown; but they were easily skimmed off, and left no distinctive flavor behind.

Having gone so far, I know the reader will be interested to learn of the styles in which this particular article was served up by the soldiers. Of course, many of them were eaten just as they were received — hardtack plain; then I have already spoken of their being crumbed in coffee, giving the "hardtack and coffee."

Probably more were eaten in this way than in any other, for they thus frequently furnished the soldier his breakfast and supper. But there were other and more appetizing ways of preparing them. Many of the soldiers, partly through a slight taste for the business but more from force of circumstances, became in their way and opinion experts in the art of cooking the greatest variety of dishes with the smallest amount of capital.

Some of these crumbed them in soups for want of other thickening. For this purpose they served very well. Some crumbed them in cold water, then fried the crumbs in the juice and fat of meat. A dish akin to this one which was said to make the hair curl, and certainly was indigestible enough to satisfy the cravings of the most ambitious dyspeptic, was prepared by soaking hardtack in cold water, then frying them brown in pork fat, salting to taste. Another name for this dish was skillygalee.

Some liked them toasted, either to crumb in coffee, or if a sutler was at hand whom they could patronize, to butter. The toasting generally took place from the end of a split stick.

Then they worked into milk-toast made of condensed milk at seventy-five cents a can; but only a recruit with a big bounty, or an old vet, the child of wealthy parents, or a reenlisted man did much in that way. A few who succeeded by hook or by crook in saving up a portion of their sugar ration spread it upon hardtack. And so in various ways the ingenuity of the men was taxed to make this plainest and commonest, yet most serviceable of army food, to do duty in every conceivable combination.

Traditional Hardtack

- 6 cups flour
- 1 cup water

Preheat oven to 375°F.

Mix flour and water together in a bowl. Place the water in the bowl, and slowly add in flour while stirring constantly, until the mixture becomes too thick to stir, at which point enough flour has been added.

Knead dough and roll out until it is 1/2" (1cm.) thick.

Using a pizza cutter, cut the dough into 3"x3" (7cm. x 7cm.) squares.

Poke four rows of four holes in the cracker using a skewer stick.

Lay the crackers out on an ungreased cookie sheet.

Place in oven and bake for 30 minutes.

Remove from oven, flip crackers over, and bake for another 30 minutes

Take crackers out when they are a light golden brown. Let the crackers cool for 30 minutes before eating.